DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 276 324 FL 016 306

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TITLE Foreign Language Vocabulary Learning--A Criterion of Learning Achievement.
PUB DATE 83
NOTE 9p.; In: Psycholinguistics and Foreign Language Learning. Papers from a conference (Stockholm, Sweden and Abo, Finland, October 25-26, 1982); see FL 016 291.
PUB TYPE Reports - Evaluative/Feasibility (142) -- Speeches/Conference Papers (150)

EDRS PRICE MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS *Achievement Gains; Cognitive Processes; Difficulty Level; *Evaluation Criteria; *Language Tests; *Language Usage; *Learning Processes; Psycholinguistics; Second Language Learning; Testing Problems; *Vocabulary Development; Word Recognition

ABSTRACT

In order to accurately assess the learning of vocabulary words, a criterion of learning achievement must be set for each word or group of words. This criterion would reflect: (1) the amount of semantic, grammatical, and phonological information the learner had to possess in order to have learned the word; (2) the receptive and productive processes the learner would have to be able to use with the word; and (3) the necessary degree of mastery of those processes. This is seldom achieved in practice, but such criteria of vocabulary learning should be specified in empirical research in order to make comparisons possible. (MSE)

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FOREIGN LANGUAGE VOCABULARY--LEARNING A CRITERION OF LEARNING ACHIEVEMENT

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FOREIGN LANGUAGE VOCABULARY LEARNING – A CRITERION OF LEARNING ACHIEVEMENT

In this paper I am not going to present any data or original research, but simply direct your attention to a problem that I came across while working on my thesis (af Trampe 1982). The thesis is partly about foreign language vocabulary learning. It sets out from the observation that we seem to acquire some foreign words without much effort, whereas other words require a lot of repetition and/or dictionary look-ups before they are reliably stored in long-term memory. Some words are obviously less difficult to learn than others and it seems worthwhile to try and find out what makes a word difficult to learn. If we want to do this, however, at least two notions must be made clear. First of all we must specify what we mean by saying that a word has been *learned*. Secondly, the notion of *difficulty* should be analyzed and the use of the term be made explicit in each particular case.

I shall take it as evident that the *criterion of learning achievement* varies depending on such factors as stage of proficiency in the foreign language, the different goals of different kinds of language courses, and judgements on the importance of different topics or semantic fields. I will discuss a *blueprint* for learning criteria, then, rather than *a* learning criterion.

The specification of a *criterion of learning achievement* faces us with at least two decision complexes. Firstly we must look at the word as a lexical item in the linguistic sense, and state the necessary conditions as to the lexical information to be internalized by the learner. In other words, what should the learner know about the word for us to say that it has been learned? Briefly, (see e.g. Anward 1976 and Stroud 1979 for detail), lexical competence embraces knowledge of the phonologic/graphemic, morphologic, syntactic and semantic characteristics of a lexical item. The semantic charac-

teristics include a specification of the basic meaning of the item and its semantic relations to other items. The same meaning may also have several related meanings or nuances of meaning, relating to such factors as style, verbal and situational context etc. To this we can add the notion of intentional meaning and say that an item can be understood at different levels of intention.

Secondly, we must decide which *processes* are to be criterial. Following Clark & Clark (1977), I use the word "processes" to refer to the production and comprehension processes, but in addition to this a distinction between written and spoken language must of course be introduced. Note, furthermore, that other processes (e.g. translation) are sometimes – perhaps inadvertently – taken to be criterial in tests, experiments and teaching situations.

The decisions to be reached about the different processes and about lexical information are twofold. First, we must select the number of processes and the amount of lexical information to be included in the criterion. Then we must decide on the degree to which the resulting selection of specifications shall be mastered before the criterion is satisfied. In practice, these decisions will be based on the experience of the teacher or researcher, but there will also be an element of personal belief and personal priorities in the decision-making.

As to the selection of processes, there would probably be some agreement – today – whether to include or exclude different skills based on the spoken-written distinction. Regarding the comprehension and production processes, everyone will agree on comprehension as a necessary condition of learning achievement. The question is to what extent *production* should be a necessary condition as well. In the model of foreign language acquisition proposed by Krashen (1981), what has been acquired is discussed solely in terms of production skills. In studies based on the spontaneous or elicited speech of informants (e.g. Kotsinas 1982) it seems natural to consider learning achievement in these terms only.

From an epistemological point of view, however, I cannot see how we could maintain that someone who understands a word, but does not use it in production, has not learned that word. Besides, it is usually agreed that the vocabulary of native speakers contains a large amount of words that are comprehended though not actively used. It also seems to be the case that

children can understand more than they can express (Clark & Clark 1977: 487, Benedict 1979). One would expect the same principles to apply to foreign language learners. Add to this the limitations of elicitation procedures, and the fact that production is dependent on factors other than learning (e.g. "intention to communicate"), and the conclusion must be that production cannot be a necessary condition of learning achievement for all words and all learners.

Now, the goal of most language courses is both production and comprehension. Even so, we must use the production condition with discrimination. If we discuss the principles of foreign language learning in terms of production only, there is an obvious risk of drawing the wrong conclusions about the learning process and about teaching methods. With regard to the latter, note that some researchers (e.g. Gary 1978, Winitz & Reeds 1975) claim that beginners' foreign language learning may actually benefit from the exclusion of production skills.

The conclusion above must be held in mind when we decide on the degree of processing mastery – referred to here as the degree of *fluency*. The latter term is usually taken to mean speaking fluency, but, as Leeson (1975) points out, fluency is determined by both comprehension and production factors, and we can distinguish between *encoding* fluency and *decoding* fluency. The degree of fluency can be stated rather grossly as encoding rate and decoding rate.

Let us now turn to the selection of lexical information. One basic problem is to choose criteria appropriate to the stage of L2 learning in question. In L1, the acquisition of vocabulary is a life-long process in which we continuously add new words and new meaning to those we already possess. Whereas there has been some research done on the first stages of this process, very little is known about the beginning stages in foreign language learning. Usually, the grammatical and semantic categories of the linguists' descriptions of adult L1 are taken for granted, but, even though they seem appropriate for adult L1 vocabulary development, they might not be adequate for the early stages in second and foreign language learning. Hakuta (1981) and McLaughlin (1981) discuss this problem. Notwithstanding this possible inadequacy, and trying to put it rather non-committally, we must make a choice for each lexical item – semantically – as to what meaning(s), semantic relations and intentional level(s), and – grammatically – as to what form(s) and con-

text(s) to include. The primary question is to what extent grammatical information should be included. In the minimal case only the lexical meaning of the item is taken into account. Note, however, that even in this case some – albeit diffuse – knowledge of grammar is necessary, as the learner must be able to identify the word regardless of morphological shape. At the other end of the scale both the lexical and the grammatical meaning is understood/expressed.

For the phonological level we can think of the choice as being one of level or levels of specification, where the minimal requirement is that perceptual equivalence obtains (to the learner). In a teleological model of the speaker suggested by Lindblom (forthcoming), perceptual equivalence is the fundamental characteristic of different realizations of a word (cf. de Saussure's statement "Dans la langue il n'y a que des différences"). The native speaker, however, will be able to operate on more specified levels as well, and he can for instance choose to speak more or less distinctly depending on his judgement of the listener's capacity, the signal-to-noise ratio etc. The beginning language learner will judge a number of native L2 speakers' forms as perceptually equivalent, and he will tolerate deviations from the native norm in his own production provided perceptual equivalence is upheld to him. He will, however, have a low level of tolerance for noise and reductions, as he cannot use phonetic redundancy to the same extent as the native speaker/listener. As he becomes more proficient this will change and his own L2 production will be more approximated to the native norm – i.e. he will be able to operate on more specified levels, too.

As an example of a minimal criterion on the phonetic/graphemic level I will take the criterion used when scoring responses in my own study of letter learning and word decoding in Russian (af Trampe 1982). In that study I was only interested in whether a Subject had learned to identify a Russian word correctly or not. The data consisted of tape-recorded readings of a number of Russian words. In each case a response was considered correct if the reading would have enabled the Subject to look the word up in a dictionary without having to resort to purely visual matching. This meant that the scoring procedure had to be related to the responses of each Subject p e r s e – e.g. if a Subject consistently pronounced the Russian letter ж as /dɔ/ and no other letter was given this pronunciation, the letter was considered correctly identified.

The degree to which lexical information is to be learned can be referred to as the degree of *accuracy*. It should be stated for each level of lexical information in each processing mode, and could, it is suggested, be expressed as the percentage of correct responses, where correctness is determined according to the chosen criterion; e.g. "% realizations of word x pronounced at the level of specification y". The degree of accuracy can, of course, be set differently for different levels of lexical information, and there is probably an imbalance between levels to the effect that one is less inclined to accept semantic errors than phonologic and morphologic/syntactic ones.

In theory then, a criterion of learning achievement should be set for each word – or group of words. In practice, this is seldom done, or done in a very general way only (i.e. for all words or with rough distinctions such as the one between active and passive vocabulary). Unless the criterion used in experiments etc. is not obvious, I think it should be specified and stated in research reports. If not, the results of different studies will be extremely hard to compare. Given satisfactory criteria, there will of course still be problems – both in research and teaching practice – with respect to elicitation procedures, comprehension testing, linguistic description, the judgement of correctness and the measurement of fluency.

In conclusion, let me return to the second notion mentioned in the beginning of this paper – that of difficulty. I find difficulty a pivotal concept in research on foreign language learning. It seems to me, however, that this concept has been treated rather simplistically in the literature, and that – in the future – we should concentrate on the elaboration of this concept. In such endeavours, explicit learning achievement criteria will certainly be helpful.

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SELECTION OF LEXICAL INFORMATION		PROCESS			
		PRODUCTION		COMPREHENSION	
		Degree of		Degree of	
Level	Choice of	ACCURACY	FLUENCY	ACCURACY	FLUENCY
PHONOLOGIC	Level of Specification a) level of approximation b) level of tolerance	% Accurately Pronounced	Encoding rate	% Recognized Phonological Words	Decoding rate
MORPHOLOGIC AND SYNTACTIC	Forms and Grammatical Contexts	% Grammatically Correct		% Lexical items and/or Lexical items c u m grammatical features Recognized	
SEMANTIC	Meanings Relations Intensional Level(s)	% Intended meaning correctly expressed (lexical and/or lexical + grammatical choice).		% Lexical meanings and/or Lexical + grammatical meanings Comprehended	

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